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"I love America more than any other country": National and Racial Identity in Baldwin's "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon"

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1 In *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), James Baldwin poignantly captured the nature of his intense feelings for his nation of birth in stating: "I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually" (9). The complex interaction between racial and national identity is a prominent theme throughout Baldwin's body of work, but perhaps nowhere does the author explore this theme in more depth and nuance than in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," a short story first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1960 and later republished in the *Going to Meet the Man* collection (1965). "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" probes the question of black American identity within an international context. The unnamed protagonist and narrator of this story is an African American musician who married a Swedish woman in Paris, where their biracial son grows up speaking French as his first language. For the narrator's son, who has lived in France his entire life, America is "only a glamorous word" (146), but for the narrator, who grew up in Alabama, the United States is the oppressive, marginalizing country from which he had to escape in order to find the freedom to be himself. At the time of the story's action, the protagonist has only made one return visit to America since his move to France. This visit took place when his mother died; as the boat approached New York on this journey, he saw a man showing his daughter the Statue of Liberty and reflected, "I would never know what this statue meant to others, she had always been an ugly joke for me" (163).

2 David Wright observes that, in the narrator's new life in France, "he surrounds himself with people who help him come to terms with his past" (452); Wright further points out, "[s]ignificantly, none of these people are Americans – products of the society

which repressed him. As a consequence, he can see, by his love for them and how this challenges the world as he knows it, the possibility of a real, full life; he can understand his particular American demons and exorcise himself of them by becoming the man that he could never have been in the U.S." (452). The protagonist is particularly aware of the obstacles that the racist American environment would have posed to his relationship with his wife Harriet. He associates the realization of his own personal identity with his union with his wife and, even more significantly, with the birth of his son: "If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look on me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women [. . .]. We would never have been able to love each other. And Paul would never have been born" (149-150). The narrator's son proves to be a key figure in the story's exploration of the nature of African American identity.

3 The narrator's son Paul, having never lived in the United States, is intrigued by his American aunt Louisa when she comes to visit in France: "He knows that she is a schoolteacher in the *American* South, which is not, for some reason, the same place as South America" (147-148). Because his own experience has been so far removed from the world of his father's past, Paul has no context for understanding the scars which Jim Crow oppression has left on his African American family; the narrator observes that "[i]n comparison with the people he has always known, Louisa must seem, for all her generosity and laughter and affection, peculiarly uncertain of herself, peculiarly hostile and embattled" (148). The protagonist has a driving desire to protect his son from the racism that his forbears have had to endure in America, and nowhere is this more evident than in a conversation with Vidal, his French friend, after the decision has been made that the narrator will be moving to the United States with his wife and son. When Vidal asks if the narrator is happy to be leaving France, he is met with the forceful reply, "No [...].I never really intended to go back there. I certainly never intended to raise my kid there –" (167). Vidal argues that Paul "might wish one day to see the country in which his father and his father's fathers were born" (167), a comment which provokes a debate that underscores the profound tension between national and racial identity in the story:

> "To do that, really, he'd have to go to Africa."
> "America will always mean more to him than Africa, you know that."
> "I don't know." I throw my drink down and pour myself another. "Why should he want to cross all that water just to be called a nigger? America never gave him anything."
> "It gave him his father."
> I look at him. "You mean, his father escaped." (167)

4 Despite the narrator's adamancy, Baldwin implies throughout the story that it may be impossible to ever truly escape American identity.

5 The narrator finds and embraces his personal identity in Paris in a way that he could not in the United States due to racial oppression, but because of his status as an American artist, his racial identity is notably different from that of the North Africans in Paris, who retain colonialized status in France and view him as a privileged American who "refus[es] to be identified with the misery of [his] people" (157). Because of the independence and growth he has experienced in Paris, the protagonist feels that he cannot join the North Africans, whom he had once thought of as his "brothers" (156), in hating the French; consequently he is isolated from the community in France

to which he should belong according to the American false dichotomy of "black" and "white" ethnic identity. Baldwin problematizes the concepts of national and racial identity even further when the protagonist encounters a group of African American students in a Paris nightclub and introduces them to his Tunisian friend Boona. That night, several of the male students come to believe that Boona has stolen the purse of one of the female students, and the events that follow highlight the divide between the relative privilege of African Americans in Paris when compared to the living conditions of North Africans in the city, as well as the implications of this divide for any concept of racial community and ethnic identity. The encounter with Boona ends as he cries and asks, "You know, the way American girls run around, they have their sack open all the time, she could lost the money anywhere. Why she blame me? Because I come from Africa?" (190). Boona's question receives no answer but serves to highlight the complicated relationship between black and American identity in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon."

6 Jacqueline C. Jones avows that Baldwin spent his career writing "about the inherent untruth of life in this democratic United States and how its citizens ultimately mirror that dishonesty in their lives" (22). In "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," the narrator's view of American injustice and American identity is paradoxically brought into sharper focus with his distance from the country of his youth. The story most likely reflects Baldwin's own experience as an American expatriate artist in Paris, where, like the narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," he found that, for better and worse, he was seen as "an American first and a black man second" (Roberts 7). In fact, Baldwin asserted in a *New York Times* interview: "Only white Americans can consider themselves to be expatriates. Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me. You can never escape that. I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both." In "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Baldwin reveals a deep awareness of the way in which the America that he loves and criticizes more than any other country in the world shapes the identity of her black sons and daughters.

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